

“Down to Peru”

by Thomas Kenneth Fitzmorris

Surfing in Central America can be challenging, with its faster, hollower surf--especially for fifty-year-old longboarders. So, two years prior we had surfed the “Seven Sisters of La Libertad” the famous pointbreaks along the Salvadorian coast. By 2008 El Salvador was *relatively* safe if one surfed with a local. We had Wilber, the Central American Longboard Champion. All the thugs were his friends. The surf was fabulous, but there are only two temperatures: *muy calor* and “*oh my God!*”

So where next? In spring if one heads far enough south it becomes fall. And cools off since below the equator the southern current keeps Peru dry and temperate.

Sixteen hours: SFO-MIA-LIM, we landed at ten p.m., dragged our gear to the domestic terminal gates, rested on our boards for the night, surf bags as pillows, snug in fleece jackets. “New people, places, new waves,” said Nick in the dimness. “Gonna be a good trip Sonny, especially if you chill.”

Raised Catholic, we both knew Hell was real, but Nick’s “*have fun since we’re all going to hell-haha!*” contrasted my “*even if we behaved Saturday, we’re all doomed*” vibe.

We non-slept fitfully under buzzing mercury lights and air-conditioned breeze. Two a.m., awake, I responded,

“The best waves make the best memories. Ten years ago, on Kauai I surfed into the setting sun. The entire wave-face lit up, mirrored this lemon-yellow light into my face. I can replay it right now.”

“Please replay it quietly. I’m sleeping.”

Warming to the topic, my Manic ignored Nick. “I’ve wondered what creates recall experiences. Maybe the brain stops thinking and the body experiences the world directly. Cost is I may take my body places it doesn’t prefer, maybe take you too.”

“Like this terminal in the middle of the night. You can be exhausting.”

“You think I tire you, imagine being me 24-7.”

Fatigue overcame us; our eyelids dropped until the rosy fingers of dawn peeled them open three hours later.

Monday morning, Peru day 1. The sun popped up over smoggy Lima as our plane headed for Trujillo. A god with a surfboard awaited us at baggage claim. Elegant nose, deeply bronze skin and impressive biceps, Oscar had walked off an Incan frieze. A blue Toyota Corolla crouched outside. We loaded up and headed into bad-ass Trujillo. Oscar drove with vigilance. The streets were gravel, the locals sullen. Our ridiculous Corolla-with-longboards ensemble shouted not-local.

Crammed in the back seat, I asked Nick, “If we fall off a Pacasmayo wave during a big swell can we catch the next one? I counted seventeen waves in one photo!”

“I’ll bet you can get back on them anywhere in the bay. I wouldn’t worry,” said Nick. Oscar pretended not to hear.

“I had a dream last night,” I said. “I fell off one of those waves. Wave after wave came, all uncatchable. I was caught inside endlessly.”

“How’d you get out?”

“It was so disturbing I woke up,” I said.

“You might have more fun if you don’t always chase the biggest waves.”

“Embarrassing but part of me wants to be as good as I can, I said. “I got attention as a kid by being good at things. Be the A-student, do my chores.”

“You musta been a boring kid,” Nick laughed.

“My mom forgot to pick me up after my cub scout meeting one night. I was eight. When I walked in the door she apologized. Thing is, she hadn’t even noticed I was missing. So on the water guess I’m on a mission,” I said.

“Sounds like you confused being good at something with being Good. It’s always the parents, haha!” Nick chortled.

“She had eight kids in ten years,” I said. “She was a saint.”

Ninety minutes north, Pacasmayo hove into sight. The pleasant seaside fishing community sits on the bay bordered by a point off which peel some of the planet’s longest breaking waves.

Storms rise up in the Southern Ocean far below Chile. Sixty knot winds can blow for days across vast distances. After 5,000 miles, wave energy has organized itself into widely spaced corduroy energy lines in northern Peru.

Near-shore shallow water causes waves to slow, so as open-ocean swell encounters a point it wraps into bays. Pacasmayo and Chicama bays have perfect sandy bottoms so the waves can peel for a mile.

Tuesday afternoon. Peru day 2. Oscar awaited us in front of the hotel, Corolla-with-boards at the ready. “My friends, let’s go surf.”

From a bluff we studied our Ocean at El Faro, Pacasmayo’s main peak. Ten-knot side-offshore winds turned the water steel grey-blue, warbled her surface. Waves twisted into eight-foot-rolling lumps. She looked tricky.

“Four surfs in two days. I’m a bit tired but we only have two more sessions with these waves,” I said as I swept my hands across the water. “I’ll go if Oscar does and we ride the zodiac boat.”

The waves peeled so far that entrepreneurs had rubber pontoon boats with outboard motors to run surfers out to the break. We paddled out. Nick watched. We caught waves, riding the zodiac back out. Soon however we were surfing separately. I surfed well but fatigue was building. The sets were getting bigger. I glided up and down a wave, eight foot, under a windy blue sky and floated up to the wave's lip a second too long. The wave left me behind. No one surfs where I was, so the zodiac crew never saw me.

Fatigue washed over me. My gaze sagged. A little red crab perched atop a battered surfboard floating upside down beside mine. The surfboard surprised me since they usually wash up on the beach or are rescued by someone. So the board's red passenger sent a tremor through me as I wondered how long was this board abandoned so that a crab could be contentedly perched on it? It was just me and the crab now.

I paddled toward shore a couple of football fields distant. The horizon disappeared behind stacked set-waves barreling toward me sitting hopelessly out of position. Paddled grimly, forcing tired muscles. Too steep to catch, the oncoming wave collapsed in a cataract that plumed me eight feet down. I submitted, tumbled in green darkness.

Popping up, that surfboard still floated beside mine, little red crab scrambling up. I felt less alone. Ten seconds to breathe, I sucked in iodine-seaweed scented air. The second wave approached, nine foot, back-lit yellow-green by the sun. Paddle quicker! My board accelerated but could not outrace the pitching lip. Tumbling, ears-pressured. I found my leash, climbed up to my board. Red Crab's board floated far shoreward. He scurried up onto it. If he can do it, I guess I can, I thought.

I tamped down fear lurking in the back of my mind. It's possible to catch waves with a "no-paddle take-off". The third wave's shear face, ten foot, levitated my board. I had trained for

Peru, but fatigue and oxygen debt robbed leg strength. I ended up on my knees, the worst position in which to attempt a fast-breaking wave. Pitched. The Ocean held me down carelessly, then reluctantly released me. Her waves kept coming.

Red Crab and its board were gone. I was alone. Fear swam up out of my subconsciousness to say my prescient dream from three nights back was being fulfilled. I attempted to boogie-board. Fourth wave thundered, hammered me deep. My buoyant board tombstoned vertically above the water, leash stretched, severed as the collapsing wave pressed me under. Like a shark, the Ocean has no mercy. She is beautiful, but she consumes.

Fetally tumbling.

Eternal chaos.

Board gone, I hit seafloor. Fear was replaced not by panic but rather by melancholy. A cradle-Catholic, I have an abiding belief of a God from which I was created. This did not mean my request would be granted, but I knew I was not broadcasting to an empty universe when I prayed to God: help or I'm going to drown right here.

I was out of oxygen and ideas. I submitted to the Ocean, as my cognition faded. My mind left my body to fend for itself in the present as it re-inhabited that crystal lemon-lit wave I rode one decade prior. Vision-narrowed, time slowed, world shrunk.

I finally surfaced, sputtering, gasping, vision dark. The fifth wave loomed, broke over me, pushed me forward. I somehow swam, was pushed the last fifty yards to shore. The Ocean had delivered me. Nick descended the bluff, rescued my beached board, greeted me.

“Looked tough out there,” said Nick sympathetic but unknowing.

“Not good,” I said, empty-faced.

Ten minutes later Oscar emerged dripping, a glistening grinning surf god, “I lost you out there. Good surf?”

Alone hours later I stared out at the night sea, journeyed back in my mind to the chaos as breaking waves bounced sound-thumps off the hotel’s front porch walls. The rising moon glittered ruddy light off the wave tops.

Nick appeared, offered a beer. “Don’t beat yourself up Sonny; you surfed well.”

“I broke the cardinal rule: self-reliance.”

“No surfer can predict everything,” said Nick.

“Perhaps. But I was one hold-down from drowning and couldn’t save myself.”

“Sonny, I think God let you go. After all, these sets were almost endless, so why did they stop?”

I wept quiet tears. No one said anything. Fragility of spirit present. The Ocean’s waves glittered moonlight. Cool salty air wafted onshore, filled the porch. Geckos watched with wise understanding perched astride the walls...

Wind and waves. Moon. Silence.

“Do you remember the night of the millennium’s first full moon?” asked Nick. “We surfed Cowells until dark, then floated, waiting for moonrise. All those cliff-top crystal-chanting, bongo-drum players, the smell of ganja.”

“Yep, everyone went quiet when the sky started to glow, then cheered when the moon appeared.”

I remembered the spark of that moon’s blood-red light had grown into a ruby line across the water linking wharf to our surfboards, mother moon’s red tendril.

“Surfing’s not just the ride,” said Nick. “It’s good waves at Steamer Lane, and tongue tacos at Las Palmas afterwards.”

I walked to the porch rail and looked out at the night sea, her wavetops now golden.

“Remember my dream in the airport? of being held down? How did my mind then, know what would happen today?” I said.

“I think of it as vibrations in time. It’s real, no question. But is it worth it to push yourself so hard? You said yourself you can ride that Kauai wave anytime.”

“Not obvious I have a choice. Part of me’s driven to see across. In those events I think I’m glimpsing through that glass darkly; reality’s veil is lifted for a moment. True, the other part just wants a couch and a beer. Do you have any more?”

Daybreak. Wednesday morning. Peru Day 3. “Nick, Surfline says central Peru buoy’s one and 3/4 meters every twenty seconds. Damn, sounds like double-overhead at the point!” I said.

“Better start doing your pushups, Sonny!” Nick chortled.

Oscar and the eager blue Corolla bristling with surfboards sat together waiting out front. “Let’s go my friends, today’s why you came to Peru!”

A chilly mist wrestled with the low morning sun and softened the ocean. Horse-tail clouds aloft in cerulean sky flagged the offshore breeze. Southward point after point jutted into the Pacific for twenty miles. Southern-ocean corduroy swell lines wrapped every point, endlessly marched past Chile, past El Faro. It felt cold.

“Surfers get out on a big day either in a zodiac boat or paddle southward and approach the wave from the sea,” said Oscar. “We don’t have a boat.”



We stood in wetsuits studying the waves, boards under our arms. Strong swells formed endless waves breaking vigorously. Nick eyed me; no one spoke what both felt: *“Crap, how do we get out, and what’s waiting for us?”*

“Guys we wait for a lull, paddle like crazy, get out before the next set.”

We made it out to deep water where swells rolled harmlessly under us, but I felt the point approaching because every few seconds the air itself pressurized my chest and face, very low frequency. The feeling-sound long-distance swell generates, unloading as the wave births. As each wave’s energy felt seabed, water sucked up the face, the top overran the bottom then pitched fifteen foot down, water driving down through water in a thundering cataract.

Smooth water, offshore breezes were in our favor, and we sat safely behind the wave’s peak. The wave’s back was an anxious six feet high. I shivered. Twelve guys already there. Nick and I paddled to Oscar, little chicks under hen’s wings.

“Auto-crowd,” muttered Oscar.

“Brazilians always travel in packs and they hog the best waves. They are good and very aggressive, so we Lima guys harass them back.”

Nick gathered his courage and paddled for a wave. A Brazilian cut him off, Nick fell, and the wave took him down. Oscar retaliated: he dropped in on the Brazilian’s wave, then knocked him off his board. Every Peruvian in the line-up knew Oscar. Every Brazilian did not know Oscar but recognized that Oscar was really good, really strong, and really Peruvian.

Guide or no-guide, Pacasmayo point-break waves fit only one rider. Surfers force deep takeoffs into the wave’s steepest biggest part or even behind the peak. Intimidating when we’d never surfed this wave this big.

“Nick it’s like climbing the side of a house moving eighteen miles an hour.”

“...while someone tries to knock you off your ladder. These guys are dropping off the waves early--they want the biggest waves. 100 meters north we'll catch empty waves,” said Nick.

Surfing is best approached like most things: with focused dedicated understanding; maybe compassion. Nick approached surfing with calm joy. We paddled to the waves' birthplace out of the swell-lines. From down the line I watched Nick's first wave: he paddled-quick as the swell lifted his board. As the wave emerged from its swell-mother he popped up on the youngster before it grew too fierce. Nick angled into the trough to bottom-turn then leaned on his left rail which shot him up the face. He was coupled to the wave. I followed on the next wave.

Like pumping on playground swings we float up to the lip, board speed converted to height, then we rocket again down to the trough. For nearly a mile. The way is: stay with the wave. It is the energy source. Empty cliff-lined beaches passed to our right for minutes. After each wave we rode beach jitney taxis back to El Faro point.

Two hours later I beamed, one foot in water, the other on land. Nick stepped off his board as it nosed into sand.

“Sonny, I can't tell if your face looks like the sun or the moon, but it's all lit up!”

“I'm done hurling myself into the biggest waves, I said. “God answered yesterday, the Ocean today.”

Time for tongue tacos.